

The Giant Coot *Fulica gigantea* Eydoux and Souleyet

by A. W. JOHNSON

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Distribution: the high Andes of the extreme north of Chile (Sacaya and Cotacotani), north-western Bolivia (Titicaca) and south-western Peru (Junin).

Largest of all the *Fulica*, with a comparatively small lemon and white frontal shield and dark red legs and feet, the Giant Coot is absolutely unmistakable. A rare and extremely local bird frequenting exclusively high altitude, fresh-water lakes, it has been found in Chilean territory only in the Andes of the extreme north bordering on Bolivia and Peru and, within the past 50 years, only at two particular lakes—Parinacota and Cotacotani—in lat. 18° S. From Lake Caritaya southwards to Atacama, but always within the high altitude zone, it is replaced by the slightly smaller Horned Coot *Fulica cornuta*.

First discovered in 1836 in the Andes of southern Peru by the French "La Bonite" expedition, the Giant Coot was lost sight of for many years until Rahmer in 1886 and Lane in 1890 obtained a few specimens at the localities of Sacaya and Caucosa, east of Lake Huasco, in the puna zone of Tarapacá.

During his early years in Chile the author made two expeditions on muleback to the high plateau region where this enormous coot was reported to live, without finding a trace, and it was only in November, 1943, that he finally achieved his purpose as the culminating point of a trip by steamer, train, lorry and mule which took him and two colleagues through the highest cordilleras of Arica on the border between Chile and Bolivia. Our first meeting with this bird was on a small lake in the vicinity of Parinacota (Lake of the Flamingo) an Aymará Indian settlement situated at an altitude of 14,000 feet. On this lake were a pair of Giant Coots, a floating, raft-like nest and three half-grown young.

For a while it looked as if we should have to be satisfied with these meagre results, but on talking to a young Aymará who happened to turn up at the settlement that evening, we learned that higher up in the mountains at the foot of two volcanoes, known as Parinacota and Pomarape, was a much larger lake called Cotacotani and that this lake was inhabited by a large colony of "Ajoyas", the Aymará name for this coot.

We decided to investigate and, the author being less subject to mountain sickness than his companions, it naturally fell to his lot to accompany the guide to the lake. After a steep climb to an altitude of 16,000 feet, we topped a ridge and there immediately in front of us lay Cotacotani with the twin snow-capped volcanoes rising majestically beyond. On the lake were dark objects which looked like rafts and standing on them or swimming in the water round about were 30-50 black birds.

At this point the guide volunteered the information that, hidden in a hollow at the top of a neighbouring hill, was a boat. The "boat" turned out to be two old fashioned corrugated iron tubs which we put on our backs and carried down to the lake: here the guide proceeded to fasten the two sections together with wire, and, producing pitch and a box of matches

from his pocket, caulked these and other holes and thus made our primitive craft reasonably watertight. This took over an hour and just as the work was finished the sun, which had been shining brightly, disappeared behind clouds, a cold wind sprang up, the placid waters of the lake became a sea of racing waves and in no time it was snowing so hard that we could scarcely see a couple of yards in front of us. There was nothing for it but to get on our mules and return to base.

Setting out next morning with the first rays of light, we reached the shores of the lake just as the sun was rising behind the peaks and were witness to a scene of such grandeur as, once seen, lingers for ever in the memory. Cotacotani lay placid at the foot of the twin volcanoes which, lifting their snow-clad caps to over 20,000 feet, reflected their crystal-clear images in the tranquil waters of the lake to which they had given birth and which owed its very existence to their continually melting snows.

Here, amid this scene of awesome grandeur, of immense and almost terrifying solitude, where the inclemencies of the weather in its moments of anger are such that not a single Indian is bold enough to pitch his camp, the Giant Coot has taken up his abode, a far cry from the world of man, but if we may judge from the size and vigour of the colony, a favourable habitat for the propagation and survival of the species.

We pushed off and once we had learned to co-ordinate our paddling so as to avoid going round in circles, were able to visit all of the 36 platform-nests that floated in groups in those parts of the lake where the water-weed came close to or reached the surface. All were empty until on arriving at the twenty-eighth to be visited, it was found to contain three eggs, probably the first of this species ever to be seen by a white man. Subsequently the thirty-third nest visited produced a clutch of four.

Meanwhile the coots swam about and around us and in some cases actually came to meet us, showing not the slightest signs of fear and giving vent at frequent intervals to a loud cry, somewhere between the cackling of a hen and turkey's gobble but with the characteristic overtones of a coot. So distinctive is this call that it rings in our ears even now, 20 years later.

At different points on the lake, which covered an area of several acres we counted between 30 and 40 pairs, a few accompanied by large young birds, but the majority alone. Later, at the far end of the lake, we came across a colony of Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax tayagu-guira*) nesting on a rocky islet and a group of about 20 young coots swimming about by themselves—undoubtedly birds of the year—thus confirming the guide's assertion that the "Agoya" nests twice a year, in August and again in late November or December. Obviously we had arrived in the interval between one laying and the next and this was why almost all the nests were empty and with adult birds standing about on the platforms.

These platforms varied a good deal in size, but the largest measured approximately 10 feet by 6 feet: they easily withstood the author's weight and were evidently used year after year, gradually increasing in size in the process. Built of strands of the same aquatic plant, *Ruppia filifolia*, which serve the coots as food—we actually saw them feeding—these platforms are anchored beneath the surface and are used as supports for the actual nests, resting or sleeping places for the adults and havens of refuge or training grounds for the young. It is evident that the nesting cavity or

depository for the eggs becomes flattened out with use and is built up again with soft fresh material at the same or some other point of the platform before each new laying; the sides of this cavity are so high and steep that it is impossible to see inside until one is alongside, or in some cases actually on the platform itself.

The seven eggs, and six others obtained subsequently from the same lake range in length from 62.4 to 72.5 and in width from 43.7 to 46.1 with means of 66.4 ± 0.82 and 44.6 ± 0.19 mm. respectively.

The eggs of the Giant Coot may be described in terms of the Ridway colour code as follows:

Ground colour between "pale mouse grey" and "pale olive grey", but paler than either, with numerous fine and a few large spots of "dark vinaceous brown". There are also a few underlying markings of "pale lilac". Some eggs show overlying areas of light "snuff brown" which I am inclined to attribute to nest stain.

Acrocephalus dumetorum in Africa

by K. D. SMITH

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Kenneth Williamson, when going through material in the British Museum, found two specimens of Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*), previously unknown in Africa, which had been wrongly labelled as *Acrocephalus s. scirpaceus*. One was collected by myself at Zula, Eritrea, on 26th January, 1952; the other was taken in French Equatorial Africa on 26th March, 1953. The Zula bird was a male with enlarged testes, and was one of many small unstreaked acrocephaline warblers which were found wintering in the mangroves in coastal Eritrea. On the basis of the original identification it was assumed that *A. s. scirpaceus* was a common winter visitor and recorded as such; however, it seems feasible that the other birds wintering in the swamps may have been *dumetorum* as well. To the best of my knowledge *A. s. scirpaceus* is otherwise unknown in Eritrea and should be deleted, although several specimens of *A. s. fuscus* have been taken inland but not in coastal mangroves.

References:

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